

## BEHIND LITERARY SHADOWS: LITERARY DEVELOPMENT IN ARUBA FROM 1971-1996

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### 1 Introduction

Aruba and its literature have been through and defined by three key political events: 1) Autonomy in 1954; 2) Political reform in 1971; and 3) *Status Aparte* in 1986.

### 2 Autonomy in 1954

On December 15, 1954, the Netherlands Antilles was granted autonomy by The Netherlands. The desire to be dissociated from the mother country began during the Second World War and became more determined after Indonesia declared itself independent. Hence, this marked the beginning of a period in which one had the ability to participate – under supervision of the Netherlands – in discussions pertaining to economic and socio-cultural development. Throughout this dissociation process we also begin to notice the operation of new internal forces on the islands. Already, during the war self-awareness developed, as demonstrated by the fact that we increasingly started writing prose and poetry in our own language, Papiamentu.

Until the end of the 1950s there was hardly any literary work published in Aruba, due to a number of factors, not the least of which was that Curaçao was the economic demographic, and cultural center of the Netherlands Antilles. The existence of the publishing houses *Ediciones Hooftberg* in the 1940s and *Cas Editorial Emile* in the 1950s did not mean that publication was a thriving endeavor in the Antilles. In Aruba things were still rather quiet on the literary scene.

In the 1950s Arubans mainly read literature written in English, which one could order by means of a coupon in the Sears magazine. Others ordered books from the USA through the Aruba Trading Company. Also in this period many books were exchanged among individual readers. Besides this there were poems recited by the residents in Savaneta in their parish building, and a poets' Sunday matinee in Club Don Bosco in Noord. In the years following the war there were many recitals done within the family

where books were also exchanged. It was during these years that one became acquainted with the, until then unknown, author Reinita Ras who published *Capricho di un amor* (1957), *Un resultado fatal* (1957), *Castigo di un desprecio* (1960), and *Tragedia di un pover curazon* (1960).<sup>1</sup>

Sticusa (Stichting Culturele Samenwerking) was founded on New Year's Day, 1956, in order to stimulate the cultural life on the ABC (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao) islands. Following this, the Cultureel Centrum Aruba (CCA) was founded in 1958, and through the CCA music, theater, and dance groups were established. But in those days cultural cooperation under Dutch rule meant the acknowledgement and celebration of the culture of the Netherlands and not of the native culture on each separate island. Remarkably, there was hardly anything done by these official cultural agencies concerning literature. The stimulation of a literate culture apparently was not a priority.

### 3 Political Reform in 1971

It was not until the 1960s, when the Aruban economy started to expand, that the doors began to open. For example, the publication in Papiamentu, of Aruban Folktales in *Cuentanan Rubiano* by Ernesto Rosenstand (1961) marked a new beginning alongside more regular publications in Dutch and English. Much of this literary awakening rested on the foundation of the work done by the Department of Culture and Education from 1963 onwards.

But after the student's riots in Paris (1968), the March-strike in Suriname (1969) and the May-revolt in Curaçao (1969), the spotlight gradually shifted closer to home. From 1968-1972 the highly visible literary review *Watapana* rolled off the presses (Rutgers: 246-248).<sup>2</sup> At the end of 1974, the magazine *Brindis* appeared for the first time, mainly offering beginning authors a venue for publication, a task which would eventually be taken on by *Skol y Comunidad*. In Amsterdam, the literary journal *Kontakto Antiyano* was released in 1968 and its editorial board included the Arubans C. Berkel and J. Brooks.

The writers of the seventies were concerned with the problematic circumstances in Africa, especially with apartheid in South Africa. Eventually, the establishment and management of the Walter Rodney Bookstore was added to the activities of *Kontakto Antiyano*. With this initiative, an attempt was made to import Caribbean literature via Great Britain and in that manner make it known to the Antillean public. The shelves

<sup>1</sup> Earlier in 1944 Laura Pastel wrote her chronicle *Our islands*.

<sup>2</sup> Rutgers, Wim (1996). *Beneken en boven de wind Literatuur van de Nederlandse Antillen en Aruba*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.

mainly contained literature written by authors from Africa and the African Diaspora, including W.B. Dubois, Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon and of course Walter Rodney. All of these names were not directly linked in the popular mind to literary authors, but more to revolutionaries who had made a contribution to the process of Caribbean and African Diasporic self-awareness.

Those poets who frequently published in the 1960s, such as José Ramón Vicioso and Ernesto Rosenstand, were participants in the Sociedad Bolivariana. While there might have been discussions at that venue among writers concerning social issues, a strict division was maintained between politics and literature. From the 1970's on there is an increase in works exclusively written and published in Papiamentu. A first step made in that direction was the lecture of Hubert Booi in June 1968, a year prior to the May Revolt in 1969 in Curaçao, that demanded the use of Papiamentu in all Antillean media.<sup>3</sup>

When in 1963 the Bureau for Culture and Education was founded, it was supposed to protect and stimulate Antillean culture. At the time, however, no effort was made to stimulate or to create a literary atmosphere in Aruba. This already existed in certain circles, but was more the domain of elite clubs. Because of their elitist character, the clubs remained inaccessible to ordinary people. Shut out from literary society, some Arubans became to a certain degree acquainted with the phenomenon of selling stenciled booklets *from door to door*.

It was not until 1971 that a major strike led to the collapse of the ruling elite and establishment. It was the newspaper *FENETA* (1969-1971) which was established as a reaction to the revolt of May 30, 1969, which guided this process. This paper, which was directed by the socio-linguist and poet, RamónTodd Dandaré, was more focused on class struggle and the trade union ANAAB than on literature.<sup>4</sup> It was remarkable that during and after the strikes, despite the fact that most of the poets and writers in the sixties, seventies and eighties had teaching positions and could be considered as *change agents*, no writers movement arose from the social turmoil (in stark contrast to what happened in Suriname in the 1960s). In this connection, we should not forget that a number of writers joined political parties, some of whom became parliamentarians, party-leaders or even ministers.<sup>5</sup>

A second magazine that served as a catalyst for *literati*, was the teachers' magazine *Vorm* which was renamed early on as *Skol y Komunidat* (1969-1984), with RamónTodd Dandaré joining its provisional editorial board in 1977. It was not always clear on what ideological foundations *Skol y Komunidat* was based, but lively

<sup>3</sup> *Basayo riba Papiamentu*, Lecture by H. Booi on 30-6-1968 in the San Francisco club.

<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of the ANAAB-strike the last issue of *FENETA* was published.

<sup>5</sup> Digna Lacle, Philomena Wong, Desiree Correa, Frank Williams, Robertico Croes and RamónTodd Dandaré.

discussions took place on its pages concerning the possibility of Aruban independence. Besides political topics, literary themes were given serious attention by its contributors, who included poets, writers of juvenile literature, and sociolinguists, making waves among the political and cultural elites on the island.

However, it was quickly realized that there was lack of sufficient cohesive forces to achieve sustainable results.<sup>6</sup> As a result, a vigorous scholarship policy (which was partly run by the Central Government until 1985) was pursued with the goal of replacing expatriates with Arubans – first in the education department and administration and then in medicine. It did not take long for the results of this policy to definitively change the face and identity of Aruba.

With the revolt in August 1977, the former cultural elite was replaced by a new one, which resisted the previous exclusive cultural focus on the Netherlands and insisted on the promotion of Aruban culture and language. This has given rise to significant publications and activities in at least three areas, including:

1. Education and Science: *Witboek Status Aparte*, John H. van der Kuyp/H.R. Fingal (1976), *Nos simbolonan di Union y Identidad, Teritorio Insular di Aruba* (1977), *Aruba's struggle for Independence*, John H. van der Kuyp (1978), *Aruba en onafhankelijkheid*, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague (1978), and *Sembra awe pa cosecha mañan*, Grupo Aruba (1985).

2. Literature: *Keho na caminda*, Frank Booi (1975), *De witte pest*, Angela Matthews (1978), *Punto di vista*, Jossy Mansur (1981), *Cosecha Arubiano*, Frank Booi et al (1983), *Mosa's eiland*, Desiree Correa (1984), and *Yiu di tera*, Henry Habibe (1985).

3. Cultural activities: The annual independence celebrations on the 18th of March always include an important cultural element. With the opening of the National Library in 1982 the 'Cultural Month' program was also introduced, giving attention to literature as part of culture. Each year there has been a different theme, including: 'Papiamentu', 'The Art of Story-Telling' and 'Our Literary Harvest'.

Undoubtedly these three processes have contributed to the reinforcement of Aruba's cultural identity and the broadening of its political culture. In addition, the essay-collection *Sembra awe pa cosecha mañan* (Groningen, 1986) brought a group of intellectuals together to publish scientific papers in Papiamentu for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In the case of Curaçao we can observe that the aborted writers-movement was limited to two magazines *Vito* and *Kambio*.

<sup>7</sup> The themes were a reflection of their concern and vision: Function and problems in Aruban education (G.R. Herde), Possibilities and obstacles of independence (R. Croes) Women in the labour-process (L.A. Emerencia), Micro-states and their independence (Q. Nicolais) The actual economic situation in Aruba (R.A. Betring).

In 1971, an anthology entitled *Di Nos* was published which included, among others, works by a few Aruban poets. It was not until 1983, however, that the first anthology containing Aruban writers only appeared, under the title *Cosecho Arubiano*. Poetry, prose, plays, and other literature by no less than 38 Aruban authors in *Cosecho Arubiano* helped to spark interest in local language, culture and literature laying a firm foundation for a country in *status nascendi*.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4 Status Aparte in 1986

With the realization of the *Status Aparte* in January 1986, Aruba achieved the state of being a country – beside the Dutch Antilles – in the Kingdom of The Netherlands. From then on, Aruba had the freedom to aspire to its own goals. On the eve of the *Status Aparte*, work was done to realize the following institutions: the Instituto di Cultura (1978), the National Library (1982), the publishing firm Cas Editorial Charuba (1984), the replacement of Sticusa by the more progressive UNOCA (Union di Organisacionnan Cultural Arubano, Union of Aruban Cultural Organizations, 1986) and the Bureau Intellectuele Eigendom (1987). With these institutions, a modest literary infrastructure was created, and a foundation was laid for new initiatives, such as: (a) sustaining educational progress, (b) officializing Papiamentu by means of a decree from the government, (c) introduction of Papiamentu in primary education, and (d) introduction of the Cultural Month program (1982). Street names celebrating Dutch colonialism have been replaced by names of Aruban authors; Caya Lolita Euson and Caya Jose Geerman in San Nicolas are two cases in point. A management team has been installed for creating monuments and for furnishing museums.

The result of all these developments is that from the mid 1980s, Aruban society has been infused with extra dynamism and more literature began to be written for the Papiamentu reading public. In the period from 1986 on, a new generation of authors and poets has arisen and an explosion of authors and book titles has taken place. During the first five years of *Status Aparte* (1986–1990), at least twenty book titles by authors who had not published previously appeared on the market.<sup>9</sup>

It has been observed that in Caribbean literature, a distinct pattern emerges whereby in an initial stage authors reside in their native country, but then a growing number of writers begin to publish from the metropolises in Europe, and finally the most successful Caribbean authors establish themselves in the USA. It is only now that

<sup>8</sup> An intellectual climate existed for discussions on politics, philosophical and socio-linguistic themes.

<sup>9</sup> With reference to the publications of B. Joang Fat, Tomas Figueas, Lolita Euson, Pancho Geerman, Denis Henriquez, Franses Kelly, Tochi Kock, A. Krozendji-de Cuba, Digna Lacle, Quito Nicolas, R. Priemella, Ruben Odor (efm), Josy Tromp en Frank Williams.

Aruhan writers have started to make their presence felt in the Netherlands. At present at least eighteen Aruhan authors are writing in Holland in both Papiamentu and Dutch.

It was not until the 1990s that the first novel written by an Aruhan appeared. In the novels *Delft Blues* (1995) and *De zomer van Alejandro Bulos* (1999) by Denis Henriquez and the novel *Eilandzigeuner* (2000) by Jacques Thönnissen one will notice that the scene of action is not limited to Aruba. This distinguishes Aruhan novelists from the three best known authors from Curaçao who have focused more on their colonial heritage, their imposed marginal role in Curaçaoan society, and the reconciliation between the black upper classes and the white minority on their island. Not much academic interest in Aruhan society has been in evidence in The Netherlands and only a few publishing houses, such as De Bezige Bij, In de Knipscheer and Conserve initially dared to include Aruhan authors in their portfolios.

One of Aruba's major strengths is its plurilingual society. Although literature in Papiamentu and Dutch has been experiencing rapid growth, literature in English and Spanish, the other two major languages spoken on the island, has lagged behind. In the last two decades there have been less than ten major works written in English and even fewer in Spanish. Aruba cannot achieve a respected position in the Caribbean region without dealing with literature written in English and Spanish. My estimation is that it will not be long before Aruhan writers will include in their ranks authors from recent waves of immigrants to Aruba from Santo Domingo, Columbia, Venezuela, and Peru, where reading, writing, and publishing have a longer tradition than on our island.

A major stumbling block that is hindering the advancement of literature and literary studies in Aruba is the scarcity of funds made available, especially from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, for the promotion of creative writing. But in the final analysis, it is our duty as Aruhans to build on the momentum gained over the past few decades and transform Aruba into a society that reads and writes its own destiny, rather than having its destiny read and written for it by others.